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Naturalization Ceremonies

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Naturalization Ceremony: U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York

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Naturalization Ceremony
United States District Court
Southern District of New York
May 25, 1988

MY FELLOW CITIZENS: It is always a privilege and a pleasure for me, as it is for any federal judge, to participate in a Naturalization Ceremony. I am particularly gratified that a special friend has taken her oath of citizenship in this morning's ceremony.

Many naturalized Americans, including my own grandparents, have expressed to me their feelings of pride and accomplishment upon attaining the long cherished goal of citizenship; I am sure your feelings are no different, that this occasion is a joyous one for each of you, and that this day will be the most memorable of your lives.

This ceremony presents an opportunity for all Americans, naturalized and native born alike, to re-examine and renew our dedication to the principles upon which our Republic was founded and under which it has flourished since the beginning. For these principles, not our material accomplishments, great as they have been, assure our nation its place in history.

More than two centuries ago, the American colonists, citing oppression as the cause, and natural law as their authority, declared their independence from the British Crown. In the Declaration of Independence they charged the British Monarch with a "long train of abuses and usurpations" including the following:

"He has endeavored to prevent the population of these States; for that reason obstructing Laws for the Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of land." Yes, my fellow citizens, the restriction upon immigration and naturalization was one of the causes of the American Revolution!

After independence, it became necessary for the American colonists to forge a new government and to set the course for a new nation. The result of their work was the American Constitution and Bill of Rights, to which we refer today, years after their adoption, for definitions of our rights, privileges and obligations as citizens of the United States of America. Our Constitution marked the first time in history that a written document specified that certain rights of the people were beyond the authority of the government to infringe or violate. It is true that ours is a government of laws and not of men, but every law must comply with the requirements of the Constitution, as must every elected and appointed officer of our government. The ultimate power, of course, is in the people: Even the Constitution can be changed, if our citizens desire it so, and there have been amendments to the Constitution over the years. Many of these amendments have served to expand the basic rights of our people. Our Constitution ensures that government is the tool of the people and that people are not the tools of the government; it not only protects the rights of the majority but of the minority of our citizens as well.

But the citizens of this nation have enjoyed individual freedom and individual liberty, not only because our rights are written in the Constitution and laws of our country, but because they are indelibly inscribed in the hearts of the people. Generations have worked, strived, fought and died to preserve these freedoms and liberties for future generations. Americans are realistic. We recognize that ours is an imperfect society and that those who lead us in government are sometimes not as perfect as we would like them to be. What we do not recognize, and what we do not concede, is that our structure, our form of government, will ever permit us to stop striving for improvement. We do not admit, we do not concede, that our system will permit any less than the full realization of every citizen's potential.

We have an obligation to each other to practice our form of government, to participate in it; we have an obligation to inform ourselves on the vital issues facing our nation -- to study, listen, read, criticize, praise, support, discuss and vote -- in sum, to exercise the duties of citizenship. And there are many vital issues which will occupy you as American citizens, just as those who have gone before you have been occupied with other vital issues confronting our nation. You will need to be concerned with establishing justice, insuring domestic tranquility, providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare and securing the blessings of liberty to yourselves and your posterity -- the same concerns described by our founding fathers in the preamble to the Constitution.

I ask that you bear the obligations of citizenship in mind as you go forth to exercise and enjoy your rights as American Citizens -- the freedoms of speech, religion and press; the right to be secure in your homes and free from unlawful search and seizure; the right to a free public education; the right to travel freely throughout the land; the requirement of legal cause for arrest; the right of trial by jury; the restrictions on government interference in your daily lives; the freedom to pursue a calling of your choice; the right to raise your children as you choose. But in exercising these rights and privileges, always be conscious of the same rights and privileges in your fellow Americans. Have respect for our laws; strive to change those which you think are bad; support those which you think are good, but obey them all -- obedience to law is the first obligation of citizenship. Indeed, the oath which you have just taken is similar to the one taken by the President of the United States, for his obligation, your obligation and the obligation of every American citizen is the same -- to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and the laws under which we live.

You are now part of American history, the most recent troop in the long procession of those who have made our nation what it is today. You should be generous to those who follow you in this procession, because the history of immigration is the history of America. Although the Constitution gives to Congress the authority to regulate immigration to this country and the naturalization of new citizens, American policy in this area was

established early on by our first President, George Washington. President Washington said that America should be open to the oppressed and persecuted stranger as well as to the opulent and respectable newcomer. A later president, John F. Kennedy, in his book entitled "A Nation of Immigrants," argued for a generous, fair and flexible immigration policy as a reaffirmation of traditional American principles.

America is indeed a unique nation. Every inhabitant of this country has come from somewhere else or has descended from ancestors who have come from somewhere else. Immigrants have settled our continent, expanded our industry, confirmed our pluralism, advanced our freedoms, established our economy, developed our society and contributed to all the positive achievements of which this nation is so proud. Immigration is the genius of America's past and the hope for its future!

E PLURIBUS UNUM -- We are one -- but we are from many. We are one nation but we come from many nations. Remember the nations of your origin but be loyal to this nation above all others.

FELLOW CITIZENS: We face the future together -- one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. The American heritage is now your heritage. May we all be worthy of it.